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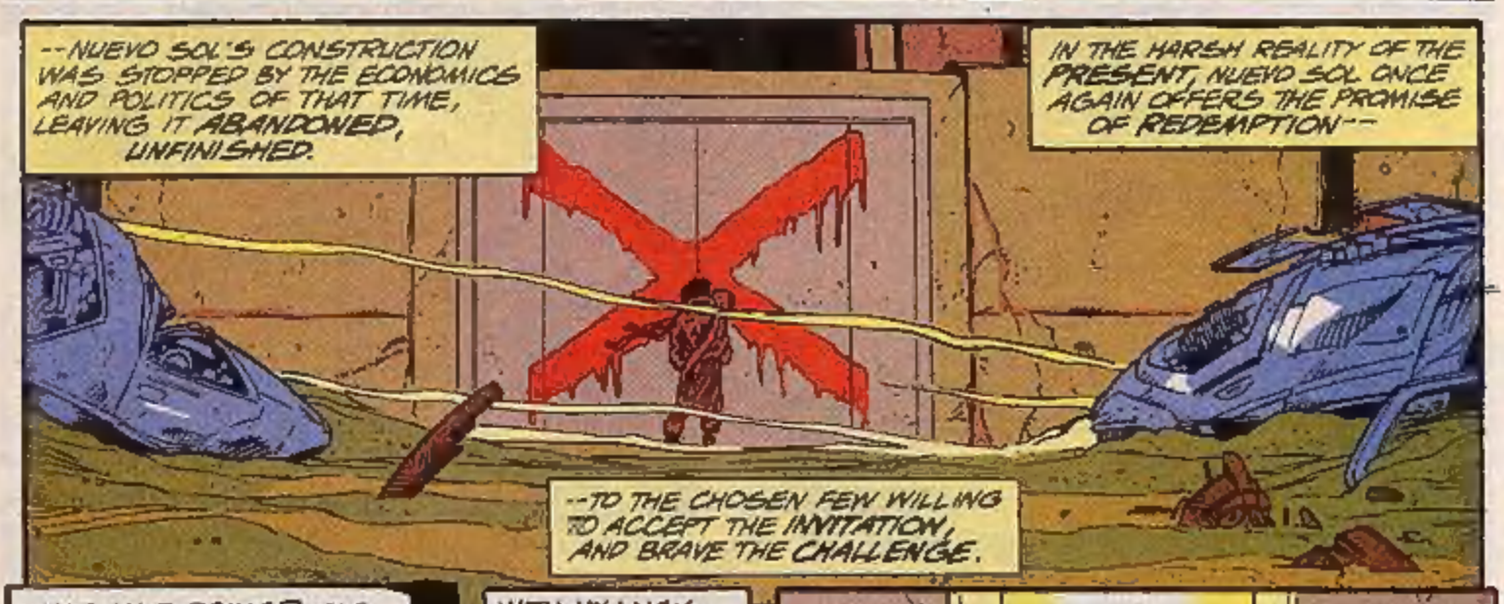
IN THE NEVADA DESERT, THE NUEVO SOL ARCOLOGY RISES FROM SAND AND SCRUB, A GHOSTLY REMINDER OF BROKEN DREAMS OF THE PAST.
DESIGNED IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY TO BE A SELF-SUFFICIENT, NON-POLLUTING WORKING AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT--


--NUEVO SOL'S CONSTRUCTION WAS STOPPED BY THE ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF THAT TIME, LEAVING IT ABANDONED, UNFINISHED.
IN THE HARSH REALITY OF THE PRESENT, NUEVO SOL ONCE AGAIN OFFERS THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION--
--TO THE CHOSEN FEW WILLING TO ACCEPT THE INVITATION, AND BRAVE THE CHALLENGE.

WITH MY LUCK, THERE'S NO ONE INSIDE, AND THIS IS SIMPLY ANOTHER INSTALLMENT IN THE COSMIC JOKE THAT IS MY LIFE.
THEN AGAIN, WHAT HAVE I GOT TO LOSE?

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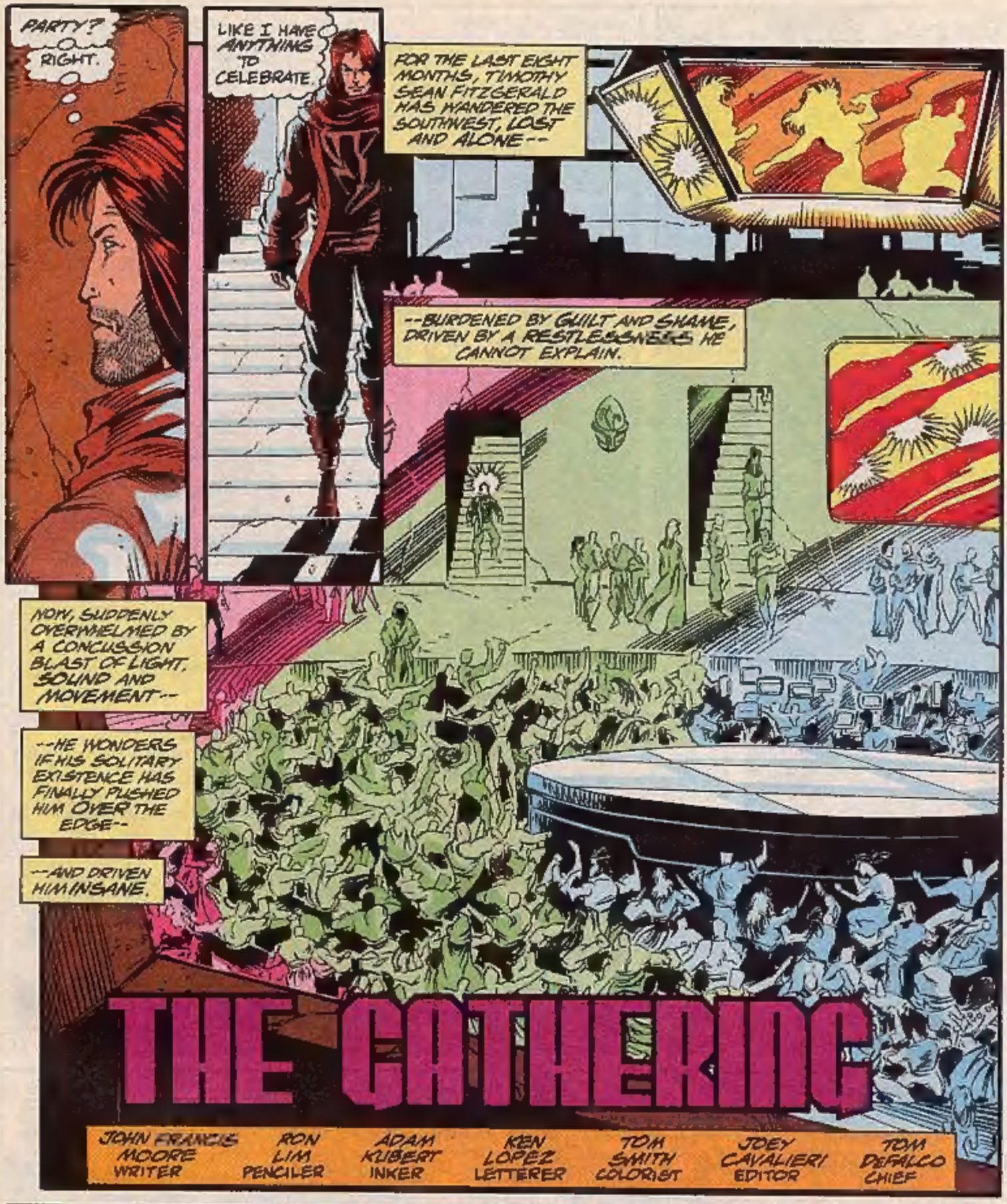
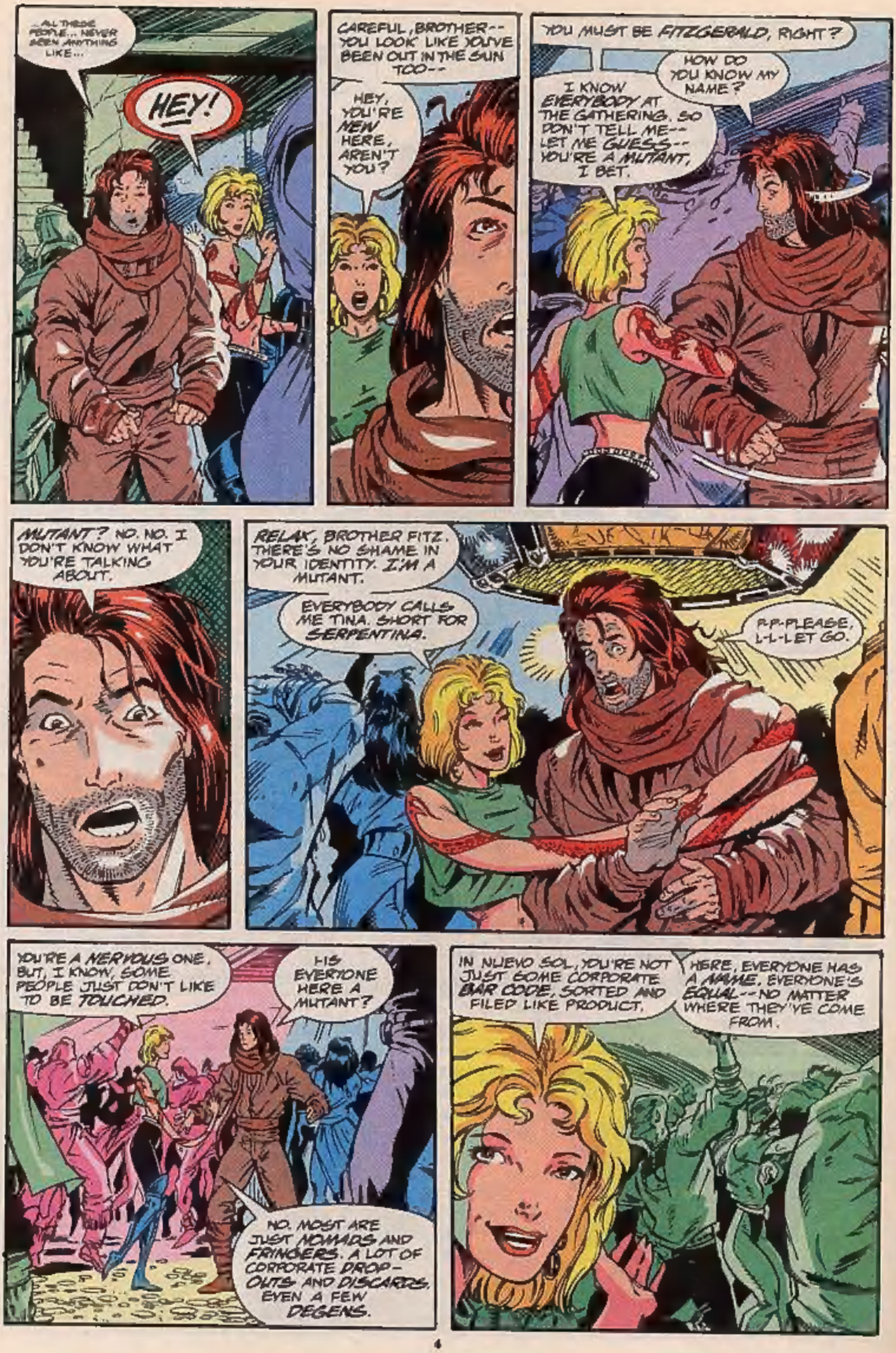
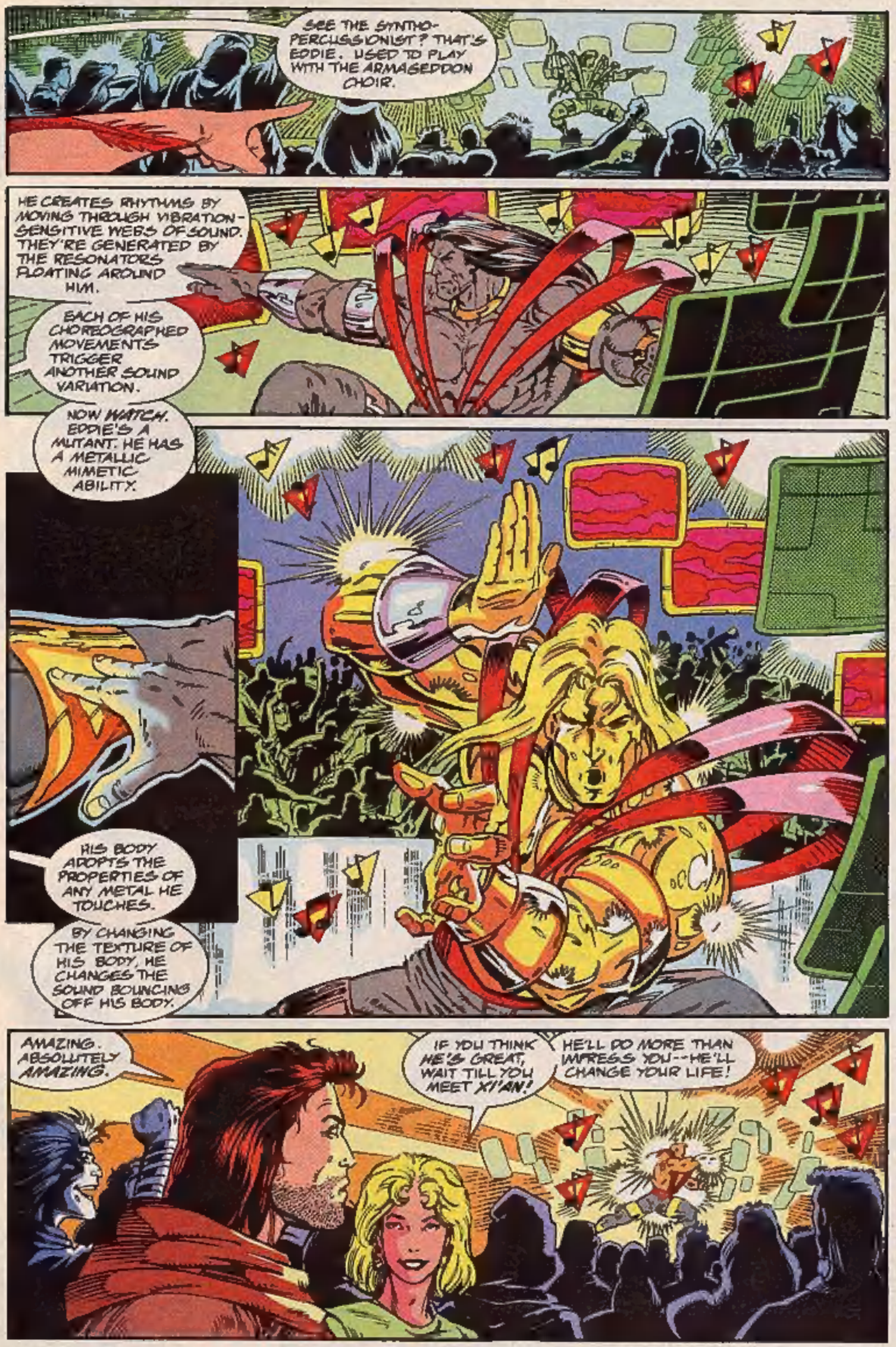
GOT A REASON TO BE HERE, MEAT?
WHAT'S THE MATTER, YOU MUTE OR SOMETHIN'? I ASKED YOU A QUESTION.
THIS INDIAN WOMAN-- IN KINGMAN -- GAVE ME THIS CARD-- SAID IT WOULD GET ME IN.
SO SHAKT/ FOUND YOU? WONDER WHAT MAKES YOU WORTHY OF THE ICE QUEEN'S PERSONAL ATTENTION?
ARE YOU A FIGHTER, MEAT?
WANT TO TEST YOUR METTLE AGAINST MY METAL-- LEARN HOW IT FEELS TO BE SCRAPPED BY JUNKPILE?
LOOK, I DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE. I'VE GOT ENOUGH AS IT IS.
GET LOST, MEAT. GO JOIN THE OTHER SHEEP--
THE PARTY'S INSIDE.


PARTY? RIGHT.
LIKE I HAVE ANYTHING TO CELEBRATE.
FOR THE LAST EIGHT MONTHS, TIMOTHY SEAN FITZGERALD HAS WANDERED THE SOUTHWEST, LOST AND ALONE--
--BURDENED BY GUILT AND SHAME, DRIVEN BY A RESTLESSNESS HE CANNOT EXPLAIN.
NOW, SUDDENLY OVERWHELMED BY A CONCUSSION BLAST OF LIGHT, SOUND AND MOVEMENT--
--HE WONDERS IF HIS SOLITARY EXISTENCE HAS FINALLY PUSHED HIM OVER THE EDGE--
--AND DRIVEN HIM INSANE.
THE GATHERING
JOHN FRANCIS MOORE WRITER
RON LIM PENCILER
ADAM KUBERT INKER
KEN LOPEZ LETTERER
TOM SMITH COLORIST
JOEY CAVALIERI EDITOR
TOM DEFALCO CHIEF

DON'T UNDERSTAND. NUEVO SOL'S SUPPOSED TO BE DESERTED--

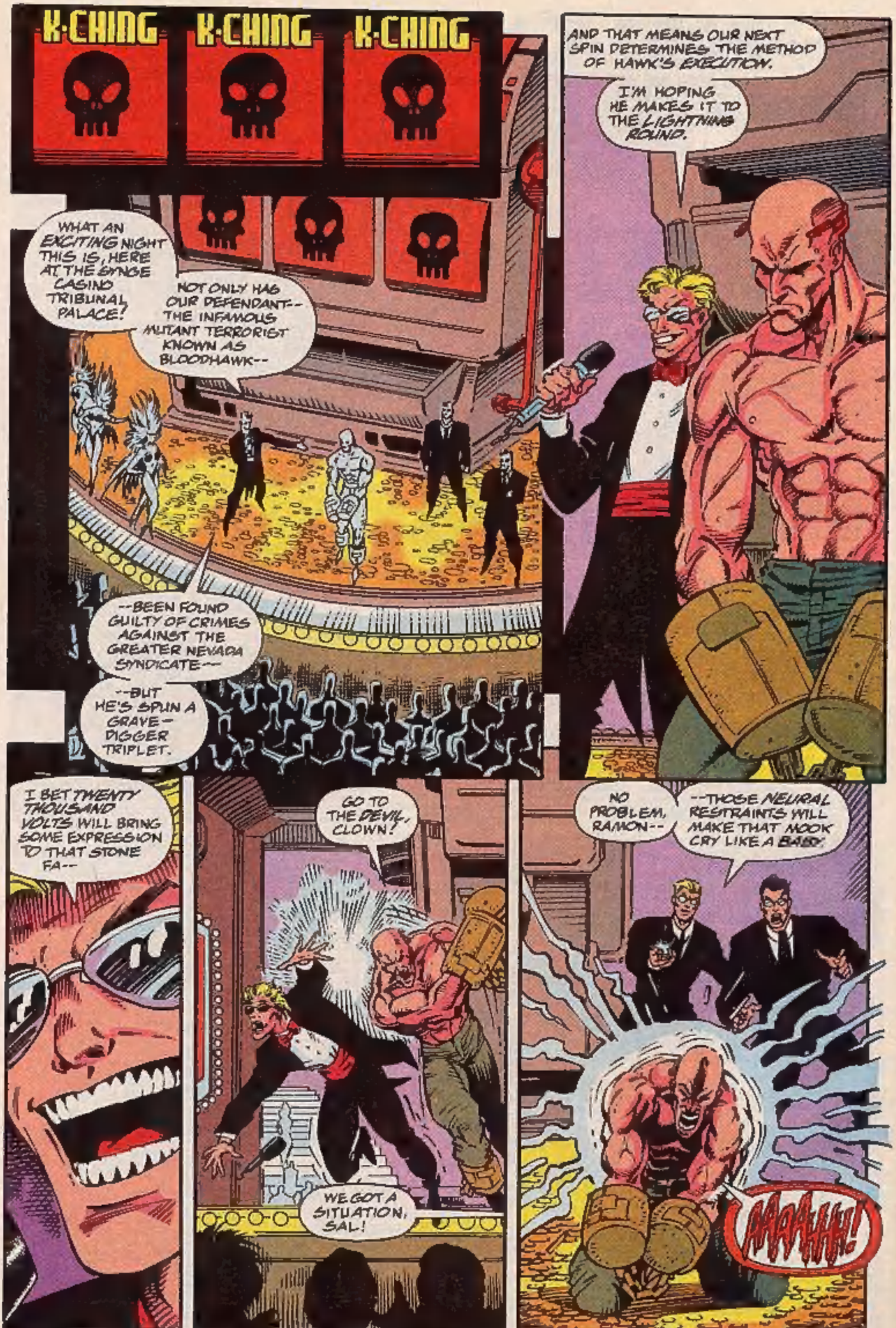

...ALL THESE PEOPLE... NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE...
HEY!
CAREFUL, BROTHER-- YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'VE BEEN OUT IN THE SUN TOO--
HEY, YOU'RE NEW HERE, AREN'T YOU?
YOU MUST BE FITZGERALD, RIGHT?
HOW DO YOU KNOW MY NAME?
I KNOW EVERYBODY AT THE GATHERING. SO DON'T TELL ME-- LET ME GUESS-- YOU'RE A MUTANT, I BET.
MUTANT? NO. NO. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.
RELAX, BROTHER FITZ. THERE'S NO SHAME IN YOUR IDENTITY. I'M A MUTANT.
EVERYBODY CALLS ME TINA. SHORT FOR SERPENTINA.
P-P-PLEASE, L-L-LET GO.
YOU'RE A NERVOUS ONE. BUT, I KNOW, SOME PEOPLE JUST DON'T LIKE TO BE TOUCHED.
IS EVERYONE HERE A MUTANT?
NO. MOST ARE JUST NOMADS AND FRINGERS. A LOT OF CORPORATE DROP-OUTS AND DISCARDS. EVEN A FEW DEGENS.
IN NUEVO SOL, YOU'RE NOT JUST SOME CORPORATE BAR CODE, SORTED AND FILED LIKE PRODUCT.
HERE, EVERYONE HAS A NAME. EVERYONE'S EQUAL-- NO MATTER WHERE THEY'VE COME FROM.


SEE THE SYNTHO-PERCUSSIONIST? THAT'S EDDIE. USED TO PLAY WITH THE ARMAGEDDON CHOIR.
HE CREATES RHYTHMS BY MOVING THROUGH VIBRATION-SENSITIVE WEBS OF SOUND. THEY'RE GENERATED BY THE RESONATORS FLOATING AROUND HIM.
EACH OF HIS CHOREOGRAPHED MOVEMENTS TRIGGER ANOTHER SOUND VARIATION.
NOW WATCH. EDDIE'S A MUTANT. HE HAS A METALLIC MIMETIC ABILITY.
HIS BODY ADOPTS THE PROPERTIES OF ANY METAL HE TOUCHES.
BY CHANGING THE TEXTURE OF HIS BODY, HE CHANGES THE SOUND BOUNCING OFF HIS BODY.
AMAZING. ABSOLUTELY AMAZING.
IF YOU THINK HE'S GREAT, WAIT TILL YOU MEET XI'AN!
HE'LL DO MORE THAN IMPRESS YOU--HE'LL CHANGE YOUR LIFE!

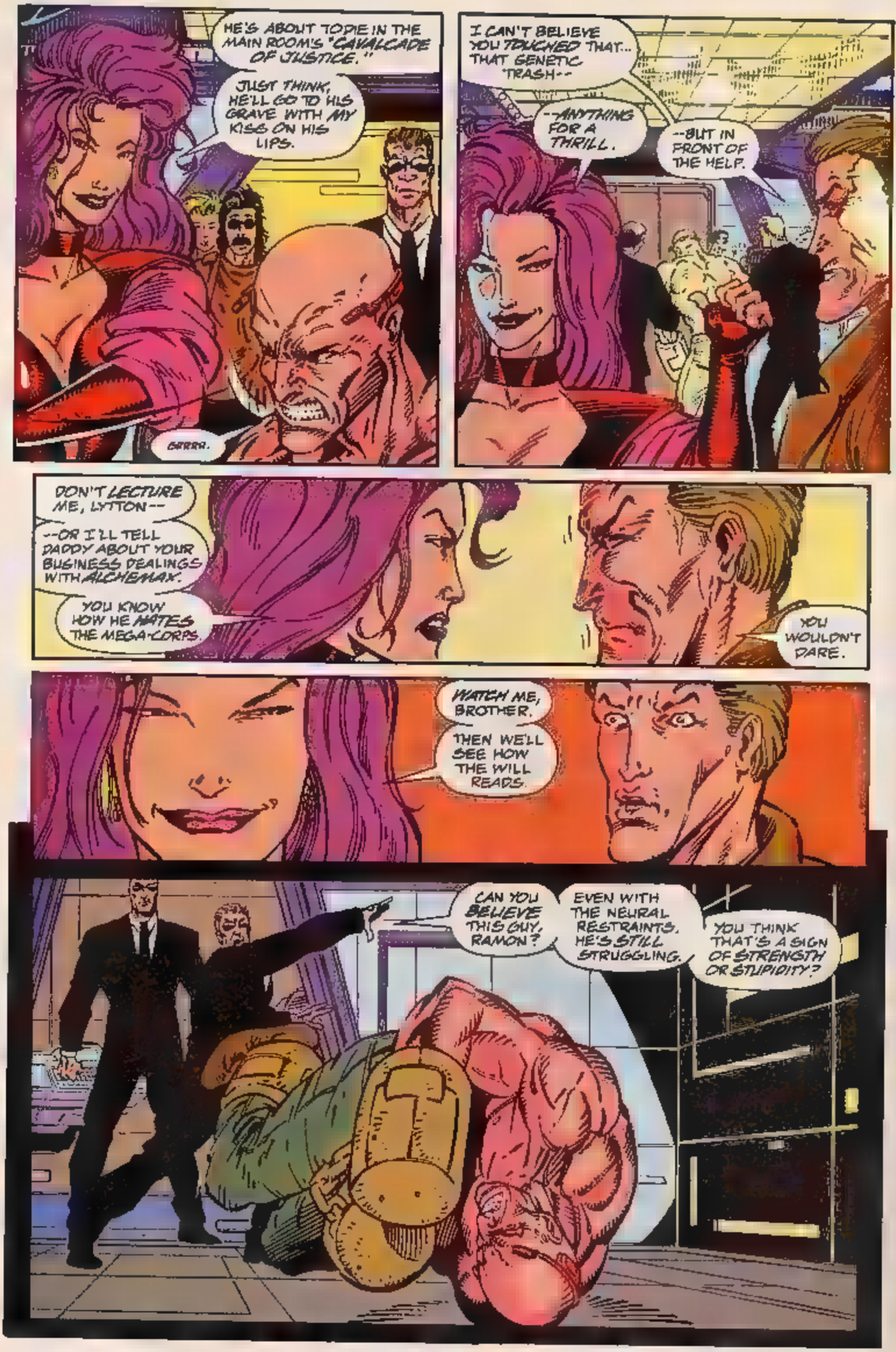
BELOW THE GATHERING FESTIVITIES, IN A SECURITY ROOM ON A LOWER LEVEL...
WHERE IS XI'AN, SHAKTI?
HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO PROTECT HIM WHEN HE KEEPS WANDERING OFF INTO THE DESERT WITHOUT A WORD.
XI'AN'S CAPABLE OF TAKING CARE OF HIMSELF. YOU KNOW THAT. YOU WERE BROTHERS IN THE LAWLESS.
XI'AN'S CHANGED SINCE HE RETURNED FROM SAIGON. THESE MESSIANIC DELUSIONS OF HIS WILL COST US ALL.
WE'RE MUTANTS. WE HAVE POWER TO DO WHAT WE PLEASE. XI'AN IS A FOOL NOT TO USE--
FEEL THE SHARP PAIN AT THE BASE OF YOUR SKULL? THAT'S MY TELEPATHIC DAMPENING POWERS DULLING YOUR MOTOR FUNCTIONS.
FEEL YOUR MUSCLES GO WEAK? YOUR KNEES BUCKLE?
YOU'LL PUSH ME TOO FAR ONE DAY.
YOU OVERSTEP YOUR BOUNDS, JUNKPILE...
JUNKPILE, YOU ARE HERE, LIKE ALL OF US, BY CHOICE. IF YOU WISH TO LEAVE, YOU ARE FREE TO GO.
IF NOT, RETURN TO THE GATHERING. I HAVE WORK TO DO.

DOMINATING THE NEON-STREAKED LAS VEGAS SKYLINE IS THE SYNGE HOTEL AND CASINO--
--A TEMPLE OF DECADENT EXCESS WHERE ANYTHING MAY BE WAGERED--
SYNGE HOTEL CASINO
--AND EVERYTHING CAN BE LOST.
ON THE EQUESTRIAN FIELD OF THE CASINO'S MULTI-LEVEL PENTHOUSE, NOAH SYNGE, RIDES AN ARABIAN MARE CALLED EURYDICE.
AS THE MAN WHO RUTHLESSLY CONTROLS THE GREATER NEVADA SYNDICATE, SYNGE PLACES MORE TRUST IN HIS HORSE--
STOPPING? WHAT'S THE MATTER, GIRL?
--THAN IN THE PEOPLE WHO FLOCK TO HIS CITY, LURED BY THE PROMISE OF EASY MONEY OR A QUICK FIX.
KNOWING FULL WELL THAT HE HAS OUTLIVED ONLY SOME OF HIS ENEMIES--
--SYNGE MADE SURE HE HAD THE BEST SECURITY MONEY COULD BUY.
BUT HIS PRECAUTIONS PROVE USELESS AGAINST ONE KNOWN AS DESERT GHOST.
XI'AN!!
YOUR MEN CONTINUE TO KIDNAP MEMBERS OF THE NOMAD TRIBES FOR YOUR DECADENT AMUSEMENTS.
YOUR TRAFFIC IN HUMAN LIVES IS OVER, SYNGE.

I'LL BUY AND SELL ANYONE I PLEASE.
I DIDN'T BECOME HEAD OF THE SYNDICATE TO BOW DOWN TO SOME PENNY-ANTE, BORN-AGAIN MUTANT!
NOW LEAVE BEFORE I CALL MY RATPACK TO DRAG YOUR SORRY BUTT OFF MY PROPERTY.
YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND, SYNGE. THE RED MARKET WILL FALL--
--JUST AS YOUR SOULLESS EMPIRE WILL CRUMBLE BENEATH YOU.
IF YOU SEEK TO HURT MY PEOPLE, I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER.
I HAVE THE POWER TO DESTROY YOU AND ALL OF THIS.
CONSIDER THIS A WARNING.
NEXT TIME IT WILL BE A DECLARATION OF WAR.
"LET'S SEE IF LADY LUCK HAS REACHED A VERDICT..."


K-CHING
K-CHING
K-CHING
WHAT AN EXCITING NIGHT THIS IS, HERE AT THE SYNGE CASINO TRIBUNAL PALACE!
NOT ONLY HAS OUR DEFENDANT-- THE INFAMOUS MUTANT TERRORIST KNOWN AS BLOODHAWK--
--BEEN FOUND GUILTY OF CRIMES AGAINST THE GREATER NEVADA SYNDICATE--
--BUT HE'S SPUN A GRAVE-DIGGER TRIPLET.
AND THAT MEANS OUR NEXT SPIN DETERMINES THE METHOD OF HAWK'S EXECUTION.
I'M HOPING HE MAKES IT TO THE LIGHTNING ROUND.
I BET TWENTY THOUSAND VOLTS WILL BRING SOME EXPRESSION TO THAT STONE FA--
GO TO THE DEVIL, CLOWN!
WE GOT A SITUATION, SAL!
NO PROBLEM, RAMON--
--THOSE NEURAL RESTRAINTS WILL MAKE THAT MOOK CRY LIKE A BABY.
AAAAHH!

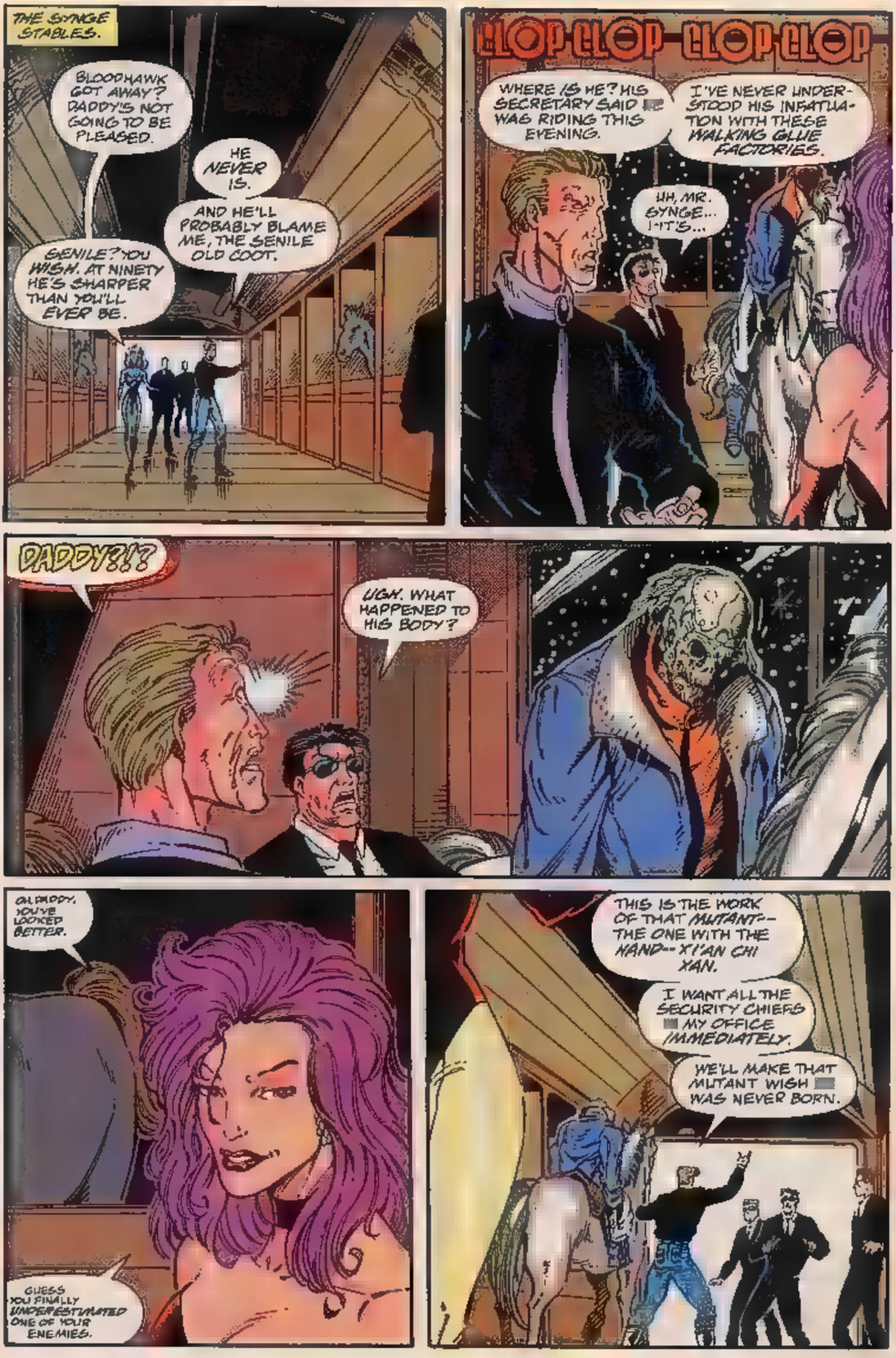
LOOK, DESDEMONA, THERE GOES THE FORMER SCOURGE OF THE SKIES TO HIS IGNOBLE END.
HARDLY THE MONSTER WE'VE HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT.
SORRY ABOUT THE DISTURBANCE, MR SYNGE.
SYNGE?
YOUR FAMILY IS A PLAGUE UPON THE LAND THAT I WILL END.
TELL YOUR FATHER HE CANNOT KILL ME THIS EASILY.
CHILL OUT, HAWK OLD MAN. THOSE VEINS ON YOUR HEAD'LL EXPLODE.
PERSONALLY, A TORPEDO OF SHRIEK HELPS GIVE ME THE INNER PEACE YOU LACK--
KNOW WHAT I MEAN?
THWUNK
ALWAYS SUCH A BIG MAN, LYTTON--
--ONCE YOU'VE MAINLINED YOUR DESIGNER DRUG DU JOUR.
DES, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?


HE'S ABOUT TO DIE IN THE MAIN ROOM'S "CAVALCADE OF JUSTICE."
JUST THINK, HE'LL GO TO HIS GRAVE WITH MY KISS ON HIS LIPS.
GRRRR.
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU TOUCHED THAT... THAT GENETIC TRASH--
--ANYTHING FOR A THRILL.
--BUT IN FRONT OF THE HELP.
DON'T LECTURE ME, LYTTON--
--OR I'LL TELL DADDY ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS DEALINGS WITH ALCHEMAX.
YOU KNOW HOW HE HATES THE MEGA-CORPS.
YOU WOULDN'T DARE.
WATCH ME, BROTHER.
THEN WE'LL SEE HOW THE WILL READS.
CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS GUY, RAMON?
EVEN WITH THE NEURAL RESTRAINTS, HE'S STILL STRUGGLING.
YOU THINK THAT'S A SIGN OF STRENGTH OR STUPIDITY?

I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE IT'S HIS MUTROID CHROMOSOMES.
MUTANT. MUTROIDS ARE THOSE FREAKS ON HELLROCK.
NOT THAT IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE. THEY'RE ALL BIOWASTE TO ME.
RATS. THERE [redacted] ANOTHER PAYCHECK.
UUUUUUUUGH
HEY! THE CELL DOOR'S OPENING.
PROBABLY A MALFUNCTION, BUT LET'S NOT TAKE THE--
--CHANCE.
WHAT THE--?
I BELIEVE THE TERM IS JAILBREAK.
DON'T WORRY, THE CRYSTAL I'VE ENCASED YOU IN IS POROUS.
YOU WON'T SUFFOCATE.
KRYSTALIN, YOU ARE MORE GENEROUS TO THESE THUGS THAN I WOULD BE.
THEY INTENDED TO PUT OUR MUTANT BROTHER TO DEATH FOR AMUSEMENT.
WE CAN ARGUE THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION LATER, MEANSTREAK.
NOW, WE NEED TO SEE BLOODHAWK TO SAFETY.

OUR FRIEND DOESN'T SAY MUCH.
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT? THOSE NEURAL RESTRAINTS ACT LIKE RED HOT NEEDLES THROUGH THE BRAIN.
THE MYRIAD METHODS OF CRUELTY MAN CAN CREATE STILL AMAZE ME.
NOT ME. I USED TO BE AN ALCHEMAX DRONE. CRUELTY WAS PART OF THE CORPORATE MANIFESTO.
HOW DO YOU FEEL?
UNNNHH...
MUST GET OUT OF HERE!
SAME HERE. I COULD ONLY JAM THE SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM FOR A FEW MINUTES.
MAYBE IT WAS TOO MUCH TO EXPECT SOME GRATITUDE.
WHERE ARE THE GUARDS? THEY WILL PAY FOR THE FIRE IN MY HEAD.
NO BLOOD.
NO TIME. FOLLOW ME.
AND DON'T WORRY. I'LL TAKE IT SLOW.
AT LAST, AIR--
CAN'T STAND [redacted] INSIDE.
SYX

NOW I CAN TAKE FLIGHT AGAIN.
WOW! NO WONDER XI'AN SENT US AFTER YOU.
I KNOW OF XI'AN AND HIS GATHERINGS. HE DREAMS OF MAN.
I DREAM OF THE EARTH.
PLEASE COME WITH US TO NUEVO SOL. XI'AN WOULD LIKE TO OFFER--
TELL XI'AN I WILL NOT BECOME ANOTHER OF HIS DISCIPLES.
WAIT A SECOND. YOU OWE US.
I OWE YOU NOTHING.
WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN OFF THE RESTRAINTS.

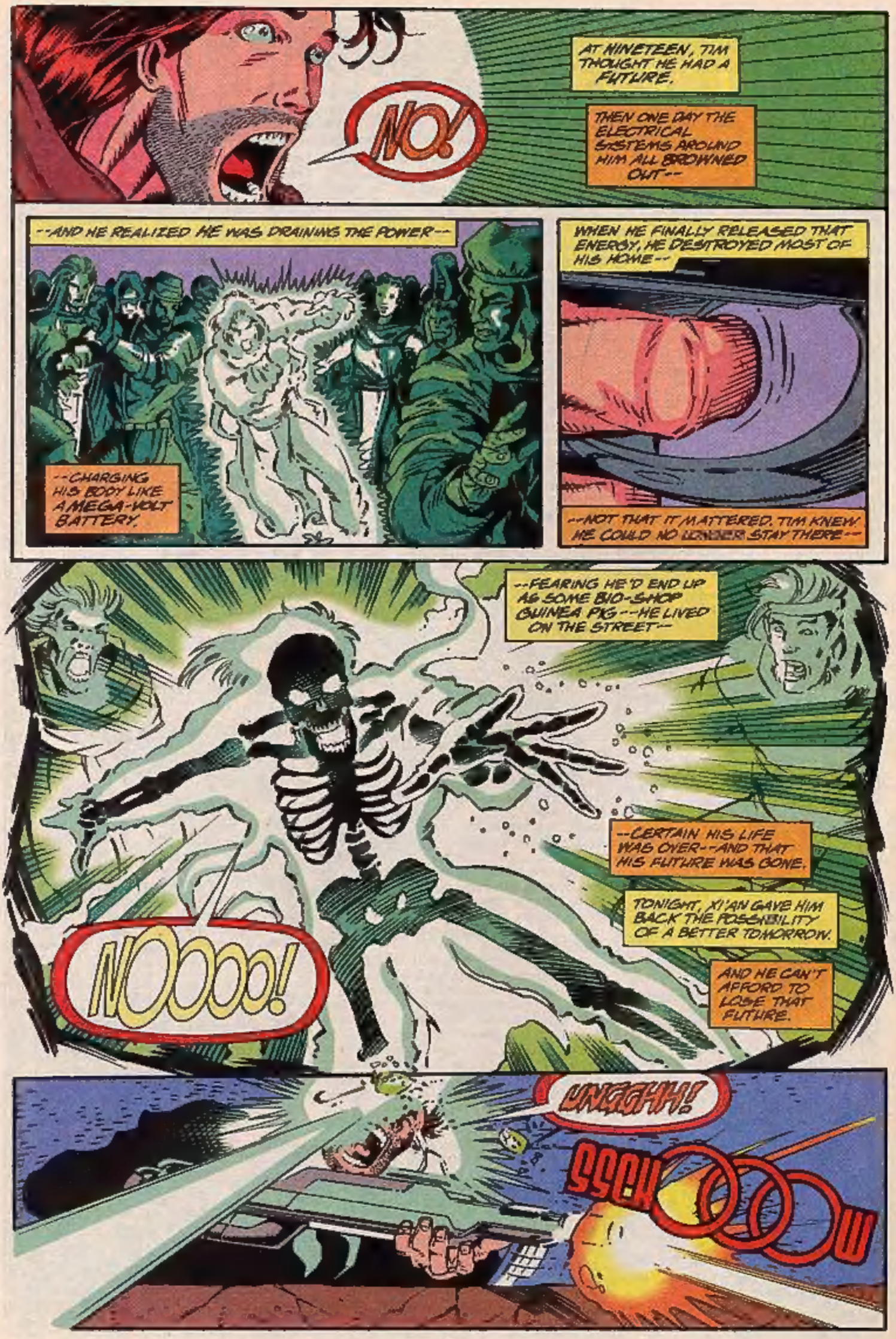

THE SYNGE STABLES.
BLOODHAWK GOT AWAY? DADDY'S NOT GOING TO BE PLEASED.
HE NEVER IS.
AND HE'LL PROBABLY BLAME ME, THE SENILE OLD COOT.
SENILE? YOU WISH. AT NINETY HE'S SHARPER THAN YOU'LL EVER BE.
CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP
WHERE IS HE? HIS SECRETARY SAID HE WAS RIDING THIS EVENING.
I'VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD HIS INFATUATION WITH THESE WALKING GLUE FACTORIES.
UH, MR. SYNGE... I-IT'S...
DADDY?!?
UGH. WHAT HAPPENED TO HIS BODY?
OH, DADDY. YOU'VE LOOKED BETTER.
GUESS YOU FINALLY UNDERESTIMATED ONE OF YOUR ENEMIES.
THIS IS THE WORK OF THAT MUTANT-- THE ONE WITH THE HAND-- X'IAN CHI XAN.
I WANT ALL THE SECURITY CHIEFS IN MY OFFICE IMMEDIATELY.
WE'LL MAKE THAT MUTANT WISH HE WAS NEVER BORN.

SERPENTINA HAS FOUND FITZGERALD. GOOD.
THEY WILL BOND, AND CLOSE THE CIRCLE.
I KNEW YOU WOULD PERSUADE TIMOTHY TO JOIN US.
I MERELY FOUND HIM, GAUGED HIS MUTANT ABILITIES, AND EXTENDED YOUR INVITATION.
DID YOU SEE SYNGE?
HE DOES NOT KNOW IT, BUT HE WILL MAKE OUR GROUP STRONG--
--IN SOUL AS WELL AS BODY.
FROM THIS POINT ON, WE TRAVEL A ROUGH AND TREACHEROUS ROAD.
DON'T BE SO ELLIPTICAL. WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN [redacted] TWO?
LATER. I HAVE TO ADDRESS THE GATHERING.

FRIENDS, LET ME INTRODUCE A BROTHER TO US ALL--
--THE MAN WHO BROUGHT US TOGETHER--
--THE MAN WHO GIVES US HOPE.
XI'AN!
XI'AN!
XI'AN!
XI'AN!
THAT'S MY CUE.
TIME TO GO TO WORK.
JUNKPILE, I'VE LOST VIEW ON THE WESTERN BALCONY. IS ANYTHING WRONG?
NAH. EVERYTHING CHECKS OUT.
DON'T SWEAT IT.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WE ARE ALL OUTCASTS HERE--
--MUTANTS, DEGENS, DISCARDS, FRINGERS, OUTLAWS--
--UNWANTED BY CORPORATE STRUCTURES THAT SEE US ONLY AS PROBLEMATIC WETWARE.
IT'S LIKE HE'S TALKING DIRECTLY TO ME.
WHAT DID I TELL YOU?
BUT WE REFUSE TO BE CATEGORIZED AND QUANTIFIED BY ANY DATABASE--
--OUR SPIRIT IS GREATER THAN THE WHOLE OF THE MEGA-CORPS COMBINED.
HERE WE CELEBRATE AND DRAW STRENGTH FROM OUR DIFFERENCES.
HERE WE DARE TO CHOOSE OUR OWN DESTINY.

YOU'RE GOING [redacted] HAVE TO TELL XI'AN THAT BLOODHAWK TOOK OFF.
LIKE IT WAS MY FAULT. HAWK'S A PSYCHOPATH.
I DON'T EVEN THINK XI'AN COULD'VE CONVINCED THIS GUY TO SIGN UP WITH US.
YEARS AGO, BEFORE THE CORPORATE WARS, AN ENTIRE GENERATION OF MUTANTS DISAPPEARED IN THE GREAT PURGE.
BUT NEITHER MAN NOR MACHINE COULD ELIMINATE HOMO SUPERIOR NOR DENY US OUR HUMANITY.
FROM XAVIER WE LEARNED UNITY, AND FROM MAGNUS, THE RULES OF COMBAT.
DEL RUIZ TAUGHT US SACRIFICE, AND ZHAO, ENLIGHTENMENT.
FROM THEIR LEGACY WE KNOW-- NO MATTER THE CURSE OR BLESSING OF OUR GENETIC MAKEUP--
--WE MUST BE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR OUR TOMORROW--
THAT GLINT...
...ON THE BALCONY...
...A GUN!


NO!
AT NINETEEN, TIM THOUGHT HE HAD A FUTURE.
THEN ONE DAY THE ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS AROUND HIM ALL BROWNED OUT--
--AND HE REALIZED HE WAS DRAINING THE POWER--
--CHARGING HIS BODY LIKE A MEGA-VOLT BATTERY.
WHEN HE FINALLY RELEASED THAT ENERGY, HE DESTROYED MOST OF HIS HOME--
--NOT THAT IT MATTERED. TIM KNEW HE COULD NO LONGER STAY THERE--
--FEARING HE'D END UP AS SOME BIO-SHOP GUINEA PIG--HE LIVED ON THE STREET--
NOOOO!
--CERTAIN HIS LIFE WAS OVER--AND THAT HIS FUTURE WAS GONE.
TONIGHT, XI'AN GAVE HIM BACK THE POSSIBILITY OF A BETTER TOMORROW.
AND HE CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE THAT FUTURE.
UNGHH!
SSCH
OOOW

I-I-I'M--
--SHOT--
XI'AN! HOW BAD--
BAD... GET... SHAKTI...
WHO COULD'VE DONE THIS?
ATTENTION. THIS IS THE SYNGE SECURITY ENFORCEMENT TEAM.
YOU ARE ALL UNDER ARREST BY ORDER OF THE GREATER NEVADA SYNDICATE.
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO RESIST.
ENFORCERS!! RUN!!!

I REPEAT. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE.
KRASSH
JUNKPILE? WHAT'S GOING ON UP THERE?
JUNKPILE?
KRYSTALIN, MEANSTREAK. INITIATE RETREAT.
AND PROTECT XI'AN AT ALL COSTS.
EDDIE, WHAT HAPPENED?
THERE WAS A SHOT. THEN CHAOS.
STAY WITH XI'AN, EDDIE.
YOU CAN'T HURT A MAN MADE OF ADAMANTIUM!
BUT WHEN YOU GET CLOSER I WILL HURT YOU!
A FEW THOUSAND CRYSTAL SHARDS SHOULD KEEP THESE ENFORCERS BACK.
TINA-- XI'AN-- IS HE--?
NO IDEA. BUT WE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE.
GET TO THE STAGE. NOW!

CEREBRA'S ACTIVATED THE HYDRAULICS.
THE ENFORCERS ARE STALLED, BUT NOT FOR LONG.
WHERE'S JUNKPILE? WHY DIDN'T HE CATCH THAT SNIPER?
IF IT WASN'T FOR "RAGS" HERE--
WORRY ABOUT JUNKPILE AFTER WE GET XI'AN TO A SAFER PLACE.
GET IN THE VAN. WE CAN LOSE THE ENFORCERS IN THE UNDERGROUND TUNNELS.
YOU DID WELL, BROTHER. IF XI'AN SURVIVES IT WILL BE BECAUSE YOU SPOILED THE ASSASSIN'S AIM.
HANG ON, MY FRIEND.
CAN I ASK ONE QUESTION--
--WHAT'S GOING ON?
TIMOTHY... KNEW... YOU'D... JOIN... MY... X-MEN...
...X-MEN?
TO BE CONTINUED.